How does God appear in heaven?

Robert Von Schriltz, the author of the book *The Incarnate Christ: An Engineer's Quest to Define the Person of Christ*, answers the question "How does God appear in heaven?"

Much of the material covered in this paper is discussed in my book, *the Incarnate Christ*, third edition. It is scattered about in various places, mainly in appendices and footnotes. In this work, I will draw these thoughts together and present a cohesive argument. I will begin with how I believe God manifests his presence in heaven. Then I will address three issues that appear to contradict my position.

Let's begin with how God manifests his presence. In my book, I make the case that there is one true God called Father, and he manifests his presence through the Son and by the Spirit. This is how God manifested his presence before and after the incarnation, on earth and in heaven. Since we are concerned here with how God currently appears in heaven, I will limit this discussion to God's appearance after Christ's resurrection.

Who will we see in heaven? In heaven, we will see Jesus Christ on the throne, as a man, with nail holes in his hands and feet – the Lamb of God. We will also see the unveiled splendor of God's glory in the face of Christ. The glory of God is the light, and the Lamb is the lamp (Rev. 21:22). All the persons of the trinity are present; with the one true God high and lifted up, visible in the Son and revealed by the Spirit. The Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are both present, each seen in relation to the other.

The bottom line is that we will see God in heaven as Thomas saw him on earth. The main difference is that Thomas saw the resurrected Christ on earth with veiled glory. He got a glimpse of God in Christ. But currently in heaven, the resurrected Christ is unveiled. God in Christ is exalted, and seen by all those present.

I wish I could say that this is an ironclad theory, with no difficulties; but this is not how it works. No one can make such claims without some challenges that shake things up a little. In the following discussion, I will address three issues that challenge the idea that God in Christ will be seen in heaven. If I were to debate this matter, and challenge the proposed theory, I would raise these issues. I would also expect that each issue is addressed with a reasonable counter-argument to validate the proposed theory.

As I often do, I will bring "orthodox" theology into the conversation. It is helpful to discuss what the church currently believes on the matter. This will shed light on the current position and the proposed position, exposing the pros and cons of each position. I hope to show that the proposed theory rest on a more solid foundation. As always, the purpose is continuous improvement, to provide a "better" solution than what currently exists.

Of course, the orthodox position of the church at large centers on a trinitarian God: God is three persons (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) of one substance (or essence). This position claims that the Father is God and the Son is God, but there is one God. This position has no problem with two divine persons called God. It has no problem with the Father and Son appearing next to one another in heaven, providing two foci of worship.

ISSUE 1: We will see the face of God in heaven.

The first issue I would like to address concerns the biblical references to the face of God. Jacob said he saw the face of God (Gen. 32:30). Moses said he spoke to God face to face (Exod. 33:11). In addition, Scripture says that the faithful will see the face of God in heaven (1 Cor. 13:12; Rev. 22:4). Angels also have this privilege (Matt. 18:10). These passages imply that God has a spiritual body with a visible face. Doesn't this contradict the proposed theory, which denies that God has a human-like form?

On the surface, this appears so. But this position is not without its problems. God told Moses, "You cannot see My face, for no one may see Me and live" (Exod. 33:20). The Bible also says, "No one has ever seen God; but God the One and Only, who is at the Father's side, has made him known" (John 1:18, NIV). Apparently, the Son is the only person to see the Father directly. More opposition arises from passages that say that God dwells in "unapproachable light" (1 Tim. 6:16) and is invisible (1 Tim. 1:17; 1 John 4:12).

The literal interpretation – that people and angels will see the face of God in heaven – is at odds with some biblical passages. There is a tension here, a tension that remains unresolved. But the tension goes away with the proposed theory. The Father does not have a body, and therefore he does not have a face. But the Son, who has a body and face, provides a way for the Father to be "seen." The one true God is seen in Christ. Thus the face of the Son is the face of God. God is not seen directly, but he is seen clearly via mediation.

ISSUE 2: We will see the Son sitting at the right hand of God in heaven.

The second issue concerns the heavenly seating arrangements. Paul wrote, "Christ Jesus is He who died, yes, rather who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who also intercedes for us" (Rom. 8:34). Hebrews states, "When He [Jesus] had made purification of sins, He sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high" (Heb 1:3). Peter said that Jesus has "been exalted to the right hand of God" (Acts 2:33). These passages say that Jesus sits next to the Father in heaven. This also appears to contradict the proposed theory, since it denies that they will sit next to one another in heaven.

On the other hand, when *all* such passages are taken at face value, as visual descriptions of what will be seen in heaven, difficulties appear. Jesus said that those who overcome will sit down with him on his throne, as he also overcame and sat down on his Father's throne (Rev. 3:21). Overcomers will sit on Jesus' throne! Will there be millions of people on a single throne? How big is his throne? On one occasion, two disciples asked Jesus a question. They asked if they could sit next to him in the kingdom, one at his right and the other at his left (Mark 10:35-40).[1] If they were all thinking literally, Jesus had a great opportunity to clarify things. He could have said that his right is available, but the left is not. His left is for the Father, for his left is at the right hand of God. But he did not offer such clarification.

It is not possible to put all these passages together to produce a clear picture. This method of interpretation creates confusion, confusion that was not intended by the biblical writers. For the

[1] Another version of this story has the disciples' mother asks this question on their behalf (Matt. 20:20-23).

most part, the Bible states that there is one divine throne in heaven (Rev. 4:2). It is called the throne of God (7:15; 12:5) and the throne of God and the Lamb (22:1, 3). This means that the Father and Son will reign together. When Jesus said that overcomers will sit on his throne, he is saying that the faithful will reign with him. What this will actually look like remains to be seen. Trying to sort out the details in order to put together a clear picture of the heavenly seating arrangements creates a conundrum. It's a distraction.

Of course, the orthodox position can take this literally. The Father and Son may be seen sitting next to one another in heaven. But the proposed theory denies this. It sticks with the central truth. There is one divine throne, thus one sovereign ruler over all. From one throne, God in Christ will rule and reign. Here, throne is a metaphor. The one sitting on it has the right to rule. In this sense, it applies to overcomers. Of course, the phase "right hand of God" is also a metaphor. It stands for the most exalted place of honor.

ISSUE 3: We will see the Father and Son interacting with one another in heaven.

The final issue concerns two passages, one in Daniel and other in Revelation. In Daniel, the "son of man" (i.e., the Son) approaches the Ancient of Days (i.e., the Father) to receive universal dominion (Dan. 7:13-14). In Revelation, the "Lamb" (i.e., the Son) takes a scroll out of the right hand of God (Rev. 5:7). Both passages are a vision of the Father and Son appearing as two separate figures, interacting with one another. Surely, this contradicts the proposed theory, since it denies that the Father and Son can visibly appear in this way.

I discuss this very matter in my book, *The Incarnate Christ*, third edition. For our purposes here, I would like to summarize my position. It is important to recognize that both of these scenes are part of a vision given by God. God-given visions are like God-given dreams, except that the recipient is awake rather than asleep. Visions and dreams are not literal pictures of future reality. They are "movies" created in the mind of God and projected into the mind of man. The purpose is not in the images per se, but in the message. God is speaking through moving pictures instead of written words.

To take all the visual details of a vision or dream as a picture of what will take place in time is a precarious position. No one would take Daniel's dream of lean cows eating fat cows as a description of what will literally happen in time. But there is freedom here. If he so chooses, God can provide visions and dreams that show a future reality in realistic detail. In the two passages in question, I believe that God did display the Father and Son as they appear in heaven – God displayed in Christ and Christ displayed in glory – but they are shown as two separate figures instead of one image seen in two different ways.

Concerning the two passages in question, I do not believe that the actual events described by the seers will be seen by human eyes in heaven. But the truth each vision represents will actually happen in time. The Son will receive universal dominion, and have the destiny of the world placed in his hands. It's the message that matters. On the other hand, the orthodox position allows these interactions to be seen by human eyes. God the Father and God the Son may be seen in heaven interacting with one another. But to take this position and avoid polytheism, God needs to be redefined as a trinity. Clearly, theology helps to determine which details may be true to life and which are not.

What is at stake?

Sometimes when you focus on individual passages you lose the forest for the trees. There is something bigger at stake in all this. The last issue brought it out into the open. How one views God is the central thing. Possible interpretations of individual passages flow from this fountain. The orthodox position created a new concept of God that allows two persons called God to interact with one another, an interaction that may be visible to the residents of heaven. This is the up side. But there is a price to pay for taking this path.

In the first century, there was an establish understanding of God, that is, Jewish monotheism. There is one true God called Father. This is the God of the Jewish people, the God of Jesus and his followers. This understanding of God naturally helps to guide biblical interpretation, making some interpretations likely and other interpretations unlikely. By discarding Jewish monotheism and creating a new concept of God, interpretations that are unlikely under the old paradigm are now possible, even preferred.

The full effect of each understanding of God shows itself most dramatically in prayer and worship. Under the Jewish paradigm, the worship of two persons called God is not possible. Under the orthodox paradigm, it is normal. While denying polytheism, the new paradigm is nonetheless open to this criticism.

Despite the theological justification offered to non-Christians for worshiping more than one person called God, orthodox Christians cannot shake the "polytheism" label. Actions speak louder than words. While the three issues discussed earlier present individual challenges for the proposed theory, they expose a deep gorge running through the middle of the orthodox position – it endorses polytheistic worship in heaven.

The proposed theory takes a different approach. It results in a different understanding of heavenly worship. The proposed theory is firmly grounded in Jewish monotheism. There is one true God called Father. In heaven, the one true God is worshiped in the Son and by the Spirit. True monotheism is intact, in theory and in practice. While the three issues discussed earlier were a challenge to interpret, reasonable solutions were offered. A reinterpretation of God was not necessary to offer these solutions.

The proposed theory places the greater emphasis on major issues, that is, Jewish monotheism and how God manifest his presence. The Jewish paradigm is adopted, yet applied anew. Only then did I carefully address other issues. While the proposed theory is not without difficulties, its main premise remains true. In short, we will see God in heaven as Thomas saw him on earth. We will look into the face of the risen Christ, see the one true God by the Spirit, and exclaim, "my Lord and my God."

The Incarnate Christ: An Engineer's Quest to Define the Person of Christ, third edition, is a free e-book on Google Books and Internet Archive.